



Mama's Gun: Melissa Leo Works Hard for the Money

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One of the landmark debut films of the last ten years has come from just the kind of director that traditional studio systems are not typically kind and generous to: a neophyte female. Add into the mix that the film's protagonist was in her late forties and her main (female) co-star would be a Native American woman and the main topics would revolve around race and class. These are not the classic elements that necessarily get the green-light as much as they *should* from film financiers, yet director Courtney Hunt, proving all of the naysayers wrong, came away from the film department of Columbia University with the necessary tools to make a perfectly-rounded, fiercely intelligent and timely independent movie called *Frozen River*.

The film takes a blunt look at what the reality is like for a poor, struggling single mother in one of the historically-worst economic periods in United States history, where living paycheck to paycheck can often mean mom's a wreck because she doesn't know *if* there will be a next meal for the kids, let alone where it will come from. In presenting the hardscrabble character of Ray Eddy, played with a diffused electricity by veteran actress Melissa Leo, Hunt thoughtfully and realistically takes into account not only what it's like for a white woman over 40 working in a minimum wage world, but also manages to deftly draw parallels between the financially-insecure world of poor white people to the desperate poverty and discrimination towards the world of Native American culture by introducing the character of Lila (played by Misty Upham), Ray's unlikely sparring and business partner, with whom she shares a stronger bond than almost anybody.

Frozen River is a tangle of knotty issues that never opts for the easy way out, fully exploring gender, race, class, age and patriotism in very new, dangerous ways that are, in general, not present in mainstream film. In the film there is no simple answer, no simplistic images of heroes in white hats or villains dressed in black; only marginalized humans, caught up in bad circumstances, trying violently to survive and hold on in a cruel time that is chewing up poor people left and right, spitting out their bones and leaving them with nothing. The triumph of the movie is not that it wraps everything up in a gorgeous bow or provides the spectator with a happy-go-lucky feeling as they skip out of the theater into their rose-colored middle class world, where there are no problems and mothers are still archaic cookie cutter stereotypes. The triumph lies in the film's ability to uncover subversively feminist cinematic truths that had not yet been uncovered. That three very special, extremely talented *women*, Hunt, Leo and Upham were responsible for such a feat is just icing on the cake. Leo was kind enough to call me from "out in the country" in June.

So, I would just like to begin by asking about your major inspirations when deciding to become an actress? What was the moment that made you say 'ah-ha! This is it!'

Well, I was really kind of very *small* and I swore I really knew what an actor's life could possibly be, working as a four- or five-year-old with Peter Schumann's *Bread and Puppet* circus in New York City. To be gathered with a bunch of other folks pretending and having people come and watch and believing our pretend, it was thrilling to me. Anything that even sort of looked like that, for the next many years, I would do. Eventually, I did find out it was acting and that people could make a living doing that! (laughing)

Courtney Hunt's *Frozen River* is one of my favorite films in the last few years. I'm a film student, so it is really inspiring to see her success because as I understand it, the path to the success of the film was hard-won, and as we know people are not giving female film makers as much of a fair shake as the men. What concerns did you have, if any, of making a film with so many complex layers with a director with little experience?

I had *no* concerns. First of all, absolutely, of course, no concerns about her gender. We had made a short, Misty Upham, Courtney Hunt and myself three years before we were able to get together again and make the feature and the short proved that we could work in the arduous conditions and the crew could work in the arduous conditions. We could get what we needed. We knew that we could capture what we needed, in a very 'independent filmmaking' kind of way. We had practiced. There was a tremendous value in that we had spent the time doing that. We had the proof in that short. I think the attractive thing that really makes it a rich story, is the *story* of the film. The story was so strong that it supersedes anything. In the end, it's the story that gathered all of the players together, and by the 'players' I mean the producers that were involved, the crew involved, myself, Misty - we all gathered to get this story in a can. That, for me, is sort of the heart of independent filmmaking and don't bother setting out to make your first film until you've really got a solid story that you want to tell.

I'm from a blue collar, working class background and so often in cinema, I find that the treatment of the hard-working poor feels terribly false. *Frozen River* certainly captured both the desperate truth for your character and the true-feeling zeitgeist of a failing economy. Have you known a lot of women like Ray Eddy?

I think it's a combination of things. I think in the film world, you get that collaborative effect when you're making movies and yeah, I've known people not unlike Ray Eddy. I've lived with people not unlike Ray Eddy, and I've spent a little bit of time in my life not unlike Ray Eddy. Both when I was growing up as a child and as a single mother myself. This goes back to Courtney Hunt, though, because it's an amazing, beautiful story, and she really researched these women. To know them and go after them in the story with a great deal of respect, these were people that she examined very closely. So yeah, it was about my closeness to the subject, and the filmmaker's closeness to the subject, in all the various ways.

Speaking of respect, I think another element of *Frozen River* that is so revelatory is that it offers a contemporary, nuanced, no-holds-barred representation of Native American women onscreen, which is so, so rare. What kind of research did you do on the Mohawk and what did you learn about Native American culture while making the film?

Things I learned about the modern day, present-day, Native American culture, primarily, I did not learn from researching the Mohawk. Courtney had, indeed, formed these relationships within the Mohawk community in upstate New York when we shot the short. Certainly, all of that information informed me, but getting to know Misty, a 100% Blackfeet American Indian, was a *revelation* to me. The way that Indian people on this continent are still marginalized, how there are government organizations formed to *marginalize* the people, that it's a long way from even beginning to be addressed, was all really shocking and moving to me. It's a real problem. The problem is now showing up in our ways in the world, the ways we were on our own continent when we first arrived; the things that were put into place that have only been cemented more fully into place over the last few hundred years. Unbelievable...

I think recently Guillermo Arriaga has really been an unsung hero in terms of writing diverse, interesting roles for all kinds of women with *Babel*, *The Burning Plain* and of course *21 Grams*. In retrospect what was your experience like working with his script and on that blistering film?

I also got to play a woman written by Guillermo Arriaga in *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* [directed by Tommy Lee Jones in 2005]. Marianne and the woman in *Three Burials*, Rachel, were a couple of the most beautifully-drawn women I have *ever* been asked to play. *21 Grams* came first and the clarity of Marianne, in that very complex script telling three people's lives, in an extraordinary way, was just so beautifully, deeply drawn. He's an extraordinary writer, and writers tend to go fairly unsung. Guillermo is absolutely at the top of the list of any writer I have ever learned the language of. From Shakespeare to Tennessee Williams to Guillermo Arriaga!

Oscar Nomination and HBO

You were nominated as Best Actress at the Academy Awards for *Frozen River* and won the Independent Spirit Award, what was that whole campaigning process like? It looks like it can get really tough...

It's quite well-perceived. I think a lot of people are so caught up in the excitement of the awards that the perception that it's an actual *campaign* is now sort of not so noticed. I had learned with *21 Grams*, and was invited, along with Sony, to hire a publicist to see about mounting a campaign for that one that didn't get all that far—except my name on a few nominations lists. So, I was quite prepared and happy that Sony thought the film was good enough to run with the other very fine films of that year for Academy consideration.

It is, it's a lot of hard work. I love hard work. If you ask me about the shooting *Frozen River* I will tell you fairy stories about how delightful it was, because it *was* to me, but the hard work of presenting oneself... I am an actor who has not been asked to present myself that often in my career... To get lost in the character and to not be recognized from one character to the other is my joy and my pleasure (laughing). To be asked to walk as myself in front of people, with quite a costume on (laughing) was complicated, but the fun and the honor are *so* not lost on me. So, I had as good a time with [the campaign] as I possibly could and just had a pretty good time with it. But it's a bizarre and strange world (laughing)

I'm sure it was probably also rewarding to have Courtney Hunt going to all of these events with you as well, being honored for her writing, which is excellent...

[I was] *So proud*, throughout all of it. All of the recognition that the film got throughout the world, awards were given to myself *and* the film and I'm just so proud. Now, a couple of years later, people ask about it and say 'oh, I'm sorry to be asking about this again' but I will talk about that movie for the rest of my life! It was an extraordinary event in film history, not only in my own history, an *extraordinary* event! The strength of the film and the filmmaker and her script is the ground on which that house was built.

One of the recurring themes of this series' interviews has been age in relation to gender. What kinds of discrimination do you think still exist for seasoned female actors in the business? Have you observed any changes, positive or negative during your acting career?

I really choose to opt to not be a member of the club that complains. And the fact of the matter is that there have been extraordinary roles written for women of all ages, since the beginning of time. There was a period in society's history where they didn't let women on the stage, but that's changed and now we can play those roles written for men, originally. So, I shy away from things that have a big content of older men getting hooked up happily with a younger woman. I think there have been enough of those stories told and I don't want to participate in that. I find in my 50th year—I'm 49 and will be 50 in September—I'm working more than I ever have, and with more varied roles than I, with a very varied career, have ever seen. I think it comes and it goes. I think there's times where there's collective thought that occurs even in the great big show biz industry. The kind of ebbs and flows of characters we see from both men and women and the kinds of stories we see being told. I encourage actors of all genders to just keep on acting and by doing so, you make the roles available.

I interviewed Pam Grier for this series as well and in her book she talks about using the Stanislavsky Method quite extensively, and as I understand it, this is also one of the ways you work?

I was trained at SUNY Purchase by Joan Potter in Method acting, which is the American name for what was brought over from Russia. I don't know where I stand in the world acting *blah blah blah* today but my opinion on it is that Method acting shows up in *many* different forms in the world today. If an actor has technique that is incorporated into the work they do, in other words if an actor *understands* the work, they are then a Method actor. They are using a "method." Whether it is the "method" that was developed by Uta Hagen or it was the "method" that was developed by Lee Strasberg at the Actor's Studio. All of those arguments about it, its time to put those arguments about "naming" acting down and begin to recognize that there really are two kinds of actors, and one is not necessarily better than the other. Maybe [one is] better suited to different projects but there are actors who just kind of show up and learn the lines and are directed, and there are actors who show up with a certain amount of *work* that they have done, are prepared to do, and continue to do while the film is being made. *That's* a Method actor in my opinion.

What can you tell me about your involvement with HBO's *Treme*, set in Louisiana?

I was first interested in it because it was my old friend David Simon, the originator of the original idea for the *Homicide: Life on the Street* television show. He called up and I had been thinking for several months that I would be very interested in getting on some kind of national television. I don't know that I named any specific corporations to be involved with, but I very much wanted to get back, regularly, on television. Although there's a lot of people within the press and the industry who know who I am and what I do, there's not a sort of general public knowledge of me if you get, you know, anymore than a few feet away from me (laughing). So, television is a powerful, powerful tool and I wanted very much the opportunity to use that tool to get better recognition. I never could have dreamt up such a great, effing job! Oh my God! Never, ever.

The company I work for is an incredible and curious storytelling company and they are coupled with HBO, who is doing something unique and unusual in television with the medium of film. Putting the cost of it up on the screen, as we say. The cost-cutting measures that HBO is known for are, in my opinion, are *smart* cost-cutting measures. It's a joy to work for that corporations thus far, it's just been great. To be doing all of that and getting all that pleasure and satisfaction from my work and to be doing it all in the state of Louisiana, which is so down-trodden and in such a bad state of affairs, to be doing something that is actually speaking about the heart of the issues down there... Its not bashing people over the head with it, in fact [its] *entertaining* people with the joys and pains of Louisiana. I hope the joy in my voice can give expression to answer your question. I cannot find the words...what a *great* effing job.

That sounds amazing! I don't have cable, but I look forward to marathoning it one day soon!

That's another great thing about HBO. It costs a lot of money to get into your home and I understand that. I don't *encourage* people, especially in these times of not having any money, to go out and order HBO. I'm sorry, guys! I'm sorry! (laughing) I really don't. Because HBO does this incredibly wonderful thing these days, where we have aired on a Sunday night and throughout the week the show is available at *your* request, for free, on HBO. So, you go and you find a bar one afternoon when you have an hour off from work and you ask them to put on *Treme* on the HBO channel!

Well, that sounds like a plan!

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Melissa Leo can next be seen on the big screen opposite some heavy-hitting co-stars: James Gandolfini and Kristen Stewart in the Sundance hit *Welcome to the Rileys*, Hilary Swank in *Conviction*, and Mark Wahlberg, Christian Bale and Amy Adams in David O'Russell's *The Fighter*, all due this fall. After that, she will appear in a supporting role in writer-director Todd Haynes' hotly-anticipated mini-series re-imagining of the classic Joan Crawford star vehicle *Mildred Pierce*, which is being produced by Christine Vachon for HBO. Co-stars include Guy Pearce, Kate Winslet, Mare Winningham, and Evan Rachel Wood; with cinematography by one of the true modern greats, Edward Lachman (Haynes' *Far from Heaven* and



Robert Altman's *A Prairie Home Companion*). Matt Mazur can soon be seen spending a lot more time in bars watching HBO.



Since he started writing for PopMatters in 2006, Matt Mazur has crossed paths with more than one iconic Swedish film star, taken film studies classes alongside American movie stars in the Ivy League, and even gotten his idol Tori Amos to apologize for giving an abstract answer. Mazur has turned in coverage of film festivals, awards ceremonies and pop culture events in Atlanta, Berlin, Copenhagen, Detroit, Montreal, New York and most places in between. Somewhere in the midst of the chaos of being a full-time scholar (film and gender/sexuality), he has managed to talk with some of the most celebrated film personalities of our time: Pedro Almodovar, Margaret Cho, Robert Duvall, Pam Grier, Mike Leigh, Julianne Moore, Sissy Spacek, and Tilda Swinton are among them. He has been a voting member of the International Cinephile Society since 2007 and remains an active participant in the organization.

Mazur's decided interest in the intersecting roles of class, gender, race and sexuality in film and pop culture continues to inform both his features and reviews for PopMatters and is also the focus of his bi-monthly column *Suffragette City*. Follow his every move on Twitter @Matt_Mazur - where he tackles important issues such as academia, actresses, awards, the quickly-evolving role of the modern film critic and shoes.

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